ABYSSINIA OF TO-DAY [1]

PART II

Customs.

TIME will only permit of reference to a few of the more interesting customs of the country which survive to-day.

From every point of view the most interesting of these are the religious pageants, some of which I describe elsewhere, and all of which are really remarkable for their barbaric splendour, and their historic interest, unique as I believe them to be.

They acquire an additional element of grandeur from being held under no covering save that of the sky in large open spaces in nature's setting. The brilliant sunshine sparkling on the gorgeous vestments and robes of the priests, lighting up an infinite variety of colours and gold and silver embroidery; the coloured and fringed parasols of the priests; the gold and silver crosses, drums and cymbals; the framework of thousands of white-robed soldiery, all carrying as a reminder of the twentieth century their very modern rifles; in the centre the Imperial Pavilion surrounded by the great officers of the Court with their long curved swords, gold-embroidered cloaks and lion's mane collars,—all this goes to make up a picture that is not easily forgotten.

A most interesting custom is that of eating raw meat. This form of diet is preferred to any other by the mass of the population and, indeed, by practically all sections thereof. It unfortunately is the cause of the universal complaint from which the people suffer, namely, tape-worm.

Early travellers have gone so far as to state that meat is cut and eaten even from the living animal. Of this I could find no evidence whatsoever, either as to the present or the past, and the suggestion is hotly denied in the country and by

[1] This Lecture was read at a Meeting of the African Society held at the Royal Society of Arts on 2nd May, 1922. For report of other proceedings on this occasion see JOURNAL for July 1922, p. 327.

most European writers, in spite of the very categorical and detailed instances given by Bruce, who describes two quite different forms of such feasts.

The raw meat dietary, however, is undoubtedly very popular, and it may be of interest if I give an extract from my diary describing a great Gebbur, or banquet, at the Feast of Maskal which I attended, and at which no fewer than 15,000 soldiers and 2000 or 3000 palace retainers were fed in four relays in the great hall.

The Gebbur.

" The Europeans were seated on a raised platform at one end of the immense hall. There were about twenty of us, and on the same platform at a separate table sat the Ras and his principal chiefs; the Empress was close by, hidden behind curtains.

" After we had had an excellent, if somewhat lengthy, meal, consisting of a mixed assortment of European and Abyssinian courses, the white curtains by which the platform was shut in were pulled back, showing the hall packed with long low tables as closely as they could be got in, the tables being covered with slabs of Abyssinian bread enclosing quantities of cooked cut-up meat.

" To the sound of bugles and trumpets the main doors were opened and in poured the chiefs with their soldiery, who had come up to Adis Ababa for the feast from all over the country. The organisation was admirable, and though some 5000 men filled the hall there was no sort of scrambling or disorder whatever.

" They set to work at once on the *hors-d'œuvres*, and then the *pieces de résistance* arrived. Hundreds of pairs of men came in, each pair carrying between them a long stout pole from which hung huge pieces of red raw meat, covered with strips of red and gold cloth.

" These men stood closely together all along the tables and one on each side, so that the meat hung down from the sticks over the tables just in front of the diners. These produced knives and rapidly cut off strips of meat, which they put into their mouths, cutting off what would not go in with knives

quite close to their lips, an operation which from personal experience I know demands great skill if one's nose is not to suffer—as the cut is always made upwards.

" After ample libations of tej and araki (native mead or hydromel and spirit) the diners filed out in perfect order—and the stage was clear for the next party.

" The whole function had lasted more than three hours, and the Ras must have been heartily glad when it was over, for he had previously dined one instalment of 5000 warriors, and two more were to follow—between 17,000 and 18,000 persons in all partaking of the royal hospitality."

As regards social customs perhaps that of marriage is the most interesting. This exists in three forms. Firstly, the man selects a bride, and, without any form or ceremony, they live together, he supplying her with small amounts of money in addition to a home and the necessities of life, and when either of them so desires they come to a mutual agreement and can separate as easily as they have united.

Secondly there is the civil marriage of a more regular kind. In this case there is a sort of contract made before the " Mayor," when the properties of the would-be bride and bridegroom are specified and an arrangement is made as to division in case of divorce, though usually they agree to divide things equally. In the event of divorce, this division is carried out to the letter.

When a woman has been " married " or " divorced " in this manner two or three times she becomes rather a " catch " on account perhaps of her worldly possessions acquired from previous matrimonial adventures. Then if she does not retire from the world and become a kind of nun she often indulges in the third form of marriage. This is a solemn religious ceremony which is really binding, and is as a general rule confined to the better class of Abyssinians.

In spite of the facility of divorce—possibly to some extent because of the mutual power to exercise it—the position of women is not at all what one might expect. They are by no means the hewers of wood and drawers of water that one finds so extensively in Africa. They do little or no work, neither washing nor mending their husbands' clothes nor cooking; all this is done by Gurages or others, who are practically

slaves, and of whom one or more is to be found in almost every household, and even amongst one's own servants—acting as " gentlemen's gentlemen."

Funerals are accompanied by the usual expressions of grief and lamentation, wailings and beating of breasts, but except for the most important persons no account is taken of graves; people seem to be buried almost anywhere, and the absence of tombstones or other distinguishing indications results in places of interment soon being lost sight of. Indeed, one place of burial near the market place in Adis Ababa is ridden and walked over by the passers-by. This is, of course, in marked contrast to the Moslem practice; their place of burial is very clearly indicated and well kept.

Form of Government.

The form of government of the country is peculiar. It is an absolute monarchy based on a modified feudal system with variations. All power is vested in the hands of the Emperor; all land belongs to him, every man is bound to render personal military service in case of need; he is the supreme judge, pronouncing death sentences and other important judgments, and generally he is indeed monarch of all he surveys.

At least that is the theory of it; in practice it does not quite work out in that way.

When the late Emperor Menelik came to the throne he made one very important change which not only materially strengthened his own position but that of the crown generally. Up to then each of the principal component parts of the country had been governed by an hereditary ruler—an obviously dangerous practice, as history has shown not merely in Abyssinia but elsewhere. Gradually as opportunity offered Menelik replaced most of these hereditary chieftains by selected governors of his own, a practice which has been followed by his successors, so that to-day, with the important exception of Gojam, nearly all the provinces are governed in the name of the Empress by rulers alien to the district. This has naturally weakened the feudal system in one of its main features, has strengthened the central authority, and, most

important of all, has tended to the permanence and stability of government.

There is a great deal to be achieved in that direction still; one could not safely describe the government institutions in Abyssinia as the button on the cap of stability, but it is a satisfactory tendency.

The great chiefs, or Rases, still exercise a great deal of power, as the late boy-emperor Lej Yasu found to his cost when he flouted the religion of the country; and unfortunately this power, though undoubtedly wisely exercised on that occasion, is a source of danger when considered together with the existing dual regime. The Empress is the nominal head of the State, but all business passes through the hands of the Prince-Regent and Heir-Apparent, Ras Tafari, who deals personally with everything, from the negotiation of a Treaty to the granting of a permit for the import of a revolver.

This opens the door to intrigue of all kinds, political, home and foreign, commercial and administrative; for applicants disappointed with the judgment of the one authority not unnaturally endeavour to help their case by appeals to the other. And the results are not satisfactory.

The governors of the various provinces receive no salary, but have to look to the proceeds of the general taxes—a tenth of the production. They have, of course, to maintain a certain number of troops, and to be ready to join the Emperor with a good many more in the event of national emergency. Periodically they are summoned to Adis Ababa for conferences with the sovereign of a more or less protracted nature, which serve the double purpose of keeping headquarters in touch with the governors and of preventing the latter from getting into mischief by too long absences in unfettered control of their own domains.

There is a Council of Ministers, Ministers of War and of Finance, a Lord Chief Justice, the Afa Negus, or " Breath of the King," and other office-holders. But the powers of this Council and of these Ministers appear to be somewhat sketchy—certainly the Minister of Finance is not troubled with Budgets and horrible things of that kind, for in his happy country there is no income tax.

Administration of Justice.

The administration of justice appears to be superior to our own in one respect at least, namely that there are no lawyers. This is possibly due to the fact that their law is even less comprehensible to the multitude than our own, being written in Geze, a language which no one understands except the priests.

Every man conducts his own case, with the help of friends and witnesses, any passer-by can be called in to act as judge, and the venue of the court is any shady spot in the open street. Here one passes numbers of cases in progress daily, conducted with a wealth of oratory and a vigour of gesture that would seem to imply that immense issues are at stake.

But these are only the minor cases; the more serious offences are dealt with by courts, the most serious of all, murder, being reserved for the Afa Negus, and the death sentence for the Emperor.

The criminal code is based on the Mosaic law, and very drastic are the punishments. For theft a repeated offence is punishable by the loss of a hand or foot, the sentence being carried out by a butcher in public, the stump being plunged into boiling fat to arrest the bleeding. Whether the victim survives or not depends, I imagine, upon how clean the boiling fat may be. I am, however, bound to say that I did not witness any case of this sort while I was there.

For murder or manslaughter the penalty is death, and the sentence is carried out by hanging. These hangings are of frequent occurrence and generally take place on trees in the market-place.

There was, however, one rather special case while we were there, where some men had attacked the house of a Greek for purposes of robbery and had killed him and some members of his family. So after strong representations on the part of the Foreign Legations, a trial took place, seven men were sentenced, and seven bodies decorated seven improvised gallows in the market-place. The bodies generally hung there for a few days.

The " eye for an eye " doctrine implies the death penalty

for manslaughter as well as tor murder, and it is in fact imposed in such cases unless the family of the victim are prepared to accept blood money. An actual example of this was the case of a syce belonging to the British Legation, who while riding a young and restive horse in the town accidentally knocked down and killed a man. In spite of the efforts of the British Minister he was hanged.

The lighter side of this code is exemplified by the following story which was current in Adis Ababa, and which " si non e vero e ben trovato." A man was cutting branches in a tree, and in the course of his operations fell from the tree on to an unfortunate individual who was lying asleep below and killed him. The family of the deceased duly demanded the life of the " murderer," and refused blood money, and the case was brought before Menelik to pronounce sentence. He admitted the claim of the family according to the law, but pointed out that to satisfy the requirements exactly death must be inflicted on the criminal in the same way as that in which he had disposed of his victim. Consequently it would be necessary for the victim's nearest relative to fall out of a tree on to the criminal. The family compromised for blood money.

I do not vouch for the truth of this story, but the decision was surely worthy of a descendant of Solomon.

Confinement to prison is a usual sentence for debt and other comparatively minor crimes, but it is a terrible punishment, for prisoners are not fed, and have to depend on their relatives and friends for their existence in the small and filthy buildings in which they are confined, when they are not working in chained gangs on the roads. And if an epidemic visits the prison, well,—the prisoners' troubles are at an end.

A curious form of procedure is that by which debtor and creditor—and sometimes accuser and accused—are chained together by the hands. They wander about in seeming amity, and I have often wondered on seeing these quaint couples which was which. Both seemed equally cheery, though as a form of amusement dragging a chained companion about day and night would be likely to pall.

The most curious example of this I came across was a man and woman chained together. In this case I discovered on

inquiry that the lady was the creditor, and very voluble she was on the iniquities of her male appendage. The situation must have become strained at times.

Religion.

Religion has played a most important part in shaping the destinies of Abyssinia, and it still plays a dominant rôle there to-day, though the Church, as such, does not appear to exercise any very great power, possibly owing to the fact that the priests and deacons, of whom there are an enormous number, are on the whole ignorant and even illiterate.

Christianity, as I have already said, is the religion of the Abyssinians, but amongst the subject races are very large numbers of Moslems (Gallas, Danakils, and Somals), and of pagans (Gallas and Shangalla), and some Jews (Falashas).

The form of the Christian religion is the monophysite, which was branded as a heresy by the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century. This doctrine recognises only one nature in Christ against the view which has maintained itself as orthodox that the divine and human natures coexisted in Him. The controversy raised at Chalcedon lasted for over a century, and the resulting disintegration largely facilitated the rapid and easy victory of Islam in Syria and Egypt.

Monophysitism obtains in Abyssinia to-day, the Church there being practically an independent one, its only link with the Coptic Church in Egypt, on which it is nominally dependent, being the appointment of the Archbishop by Alexandria; he is an Egyptian, and once appointed he is never allowed to leave Abyssinia. The only one known to have done so is the present holder of the office, who was sent on a mission to Russia.

The Abyssinians still have a monastery in Jerusalem and monasteries in Libya. Ruins of old Abyssinian monasteries and Ethiopic texts were discovered in the Libyan desert by the German explorer Falls.

The Abyssinian Church endeavours to maintain friendly relations with the other Christian communities; interesting examples of this are the missions sent to the Pope by the

Emperor Menelik in 1906, and by the present Empress in 1921. A mission was also in Jerusalem at the close of last year in connection with some ancient rights of the Abyssinian Church regarding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Under the Turkish regime these rights had been transferred to the Coptic community.

There are many churches, monasteries and convents scattered all over the country, the principal church being that of St. George, the Patron Saint of Abyssinia, at Adis Ababa. It is not an extraordinarily attractive building; it consists of an outer gallery and an inner court, both surrounding the Holy Place or Holy of Holies in which rests the representation of the Ark of the Covenant, and to which only the priests are allowed access. The galleries are profusely decorated with large life-size paintings depicting mainly scenes from the Scriptures, from the Life of Christ, the miracles, etc.

The Abyssinians show a considerable measure of reverence to their churches, outwardly at all events; I have frequently seen them when passing the church stop their retinue, dismount, and kiss the earth. Their main religious observances are, however, their fasts and feasts, which are most strictly observed. They cover about 150 days out of the year, so they are not likely to pass unnoticed; the main fast, indeed, lasts for forty days, during which they eat neither meat, butter nor eggs, and during the last three days nothing at all.

The main feast is Maskal (in September) or the Feast of the Cross, and the performance on this occasion is a really remarkable sight. I cannot do better than give you the following extract from my diary regarding this event :—

" The ceremony was held in a huge field of about 30 or 40 acres, with tumble-down walls on three sides, and the rambling Palace buildings on the fourth. The walls were lined with thousands of Abyssinian sightseers in their white ' chammas,' and hundreds of ponies and mules were tethered all about, looking very brilliant in their gorgeous trappings and gold and silver embroidered saddlery.

" At one end were thousands of soldiers dressed in white, armed with rifles, swords, spears and shields, forming the

retinues of the principal chiefs of Abyssinia, some on ponies, some on mules, some on foot.

" Towards the other end of the field was the Ras' tent, a large bodyguard grouped around it.

" Opposite to the tent, and close to it, was a group of priests dressed in their gorgeous robes and head-dresses. These opened the proceedings by a quaint service to the accompaniment of rather weird chanting—circling all the while slowly round a tall post fixed in the ground, symbolical of the Cross. The large gold crosses and the silver incense-burners sparkling in the blazing sun, the wonderful colouring of the robes, with the setting of the tens of thousands of Abyssinians all around, made a wonderful picture.

" They read passages from a huge Bible bound in red velvet and gold, and then the Abuna walked down from the tent, read a passage, performed certain rites, and returned to his place. The Bible was then carried up to the tent, presented to the Abuna, who kissed it, and then to the Ras, who did the same, and after him to the principal Abyssinian notables.

" The Ras then descended from his seat, and followed by the priests, walked slowly three times round the post.

" And then the masses of soldiery came into play.

" From the densely thronged thousands at the other end of the field every chief, with all his retinue, in turn galloped and raced to the post, and rode round it three times as hard as they could manage it to a rhythmic chant, finally pulling out of the whirling mass and taking up position on the other side of the field. It was wonderful, horses and mules and men, gold and silver trappings, modern rifles, embroidered cartridge belts, embossed shields, long, murderous-looking spears, great curved swords in velvet scabbards—thousands of them, apparently in hopeless confusion, but all really ordered, organised and planned out exceedingly well.

" There were ' masters of the ceremonies ' armed with long sticks, who added appreciably to the general turmoil. For when a chief's retinue took too long in getting round, or wanted to do an extra turn round the post, or got out of place, they hurled themselves into the galloping mass, and belaboured the offending parties vigorously with tremendous whacks.

" One old chief, apparently carried away by the excitement of the moment, galloped his pony right up to the royal tent, pulled up at the very edge of the Carpet, and waving his spear shouted out a long speech at the top of his voice. He was a magnificent figure of a savage with his bristling lion's-mane cape and his barbaric weapons, and looked quite dangerous. Apparently, however, he was merely reciting his achievements, saying he had fought for Menelik and would fight for or with anybody again. He certainly carried conviction."

There are other quaint customs on the occasion of these feasts which are of interest, to one or two of which only can a brief reference be made. For example, at Easter bands of priests arrayed in gorgeous-coloured gold-embroidered vestments, sheltered under brilliant parasols with gold and silver fringes, serenade the principal houses, such as the Legations and leading Europeans. They bring with them grass, which they bless and distribute to the donors of largesse, who in their turn distribute them to the servants. The latter tie strands of the grass tightly round their heads and wear them all day.

Parties of small children, girls and boys separately, also come round and dance and sing, until the receipt of a few small coins causes many deep bows and kissing of the ground, and a hasty departure.

The priesthood, as has been already stated, are exceedingly ignorant, but they are not fanatical, and if left alone and not interfered with are not markedly anti-foreign. They do not go in for missionary work themselves, and are tolerant of the other existing forms of religion in the country. But they do not like missionaries of other religions, which is perhaps hardly surprising, and will not have them in the country.

The Jesuits were expelled in 1633, and some who would not go were killed. The Protestant missionaries were expelled in 1838. Theodore can hardly have been said to have welcomed missionaries, though so far from expelling them he chained them up and would not let them go. King John expelled them again in 1886, and Menelik barely tolerated them. There are practically none in the country now, beyond a

French mission at Harrar and a convent at Adis Ababa, which are mainly educational and non-proselytising.

But the Moslem faith, on the other hand, is undoubtedly making headway, among the Gallas at all events, according to French, Swedish and American authorities who have recently written on the subject.

It would be a remarkable happening if the ancient Abyssinian Church that has resisted attacks on its faith of so violent a character for so many years should succumb to the " peaceful penetration " of Moslem teaching at this stage of its history.

Education, Literature and Art.

Education may be said to be non-existent, for in spite of the fact that the Emperor Menelik promulgated a decree of compulsory general education, he overlooked, or had not time to provide for, such details as a supply of teachers and schools. There is one school building in Adis, and a Director of Education, an Egyptian, a well-educated and cultured individual with a remarkable command of languages.

But as his flock consists of about thirty children it is to be feared that the results of his labours will not be very great, though that is no fault of his.

As to literature, there is rich store of legend, tradition and folk-lore of ancient date and of great interest. It is mainly of a religious and quasi-historical character, and it is little known in this country. Unfortunately, with one notable exception, we have left the translation of these fascinating works to other countries, and although I do not think that any one has made a complete translation of the Chronicles of Abyssinia as a whole—delightful records of the reigns of their kings from before the Queen of Sheba up to a few centuries ago—yet there are many partial translations of the Chronicles and translations of other old Abyssinian works by French, Italian, Portuguese and German writers such as Perruchon, Conti-Rossini, d'Almeida and Dillman, to name only a few.

The one exception, to whom I have referred above, is Sir E. Wallis Budge, who has given us translations of at least seven Abyssinian manuscripts, the last of which, the Kebra Nagast

(or Glory of the Kings), has recently appeared, and is a perfect storehouse of delight.

All these works, however, are in the form of more or less ancient manuscripts so far as Abyssinia is concerned, and it may be said that there is no modern literature, and indeed practically no books at all. I have been able to find a few bound in wooden covers, but they were merely copies of portions of the Scriptures, mainly the Gospels.

As to their arts, while I would not be so rude as to suggest that their painting is crude, yet I fear they have some way to go before qualifying as Royal Academicians. I am no judge of art, and in these precincts I should certainly shrink from expressing opinions on that subject. The pictures are mainly religious, with a military flavour occasionally, and a sprinkling of historical and hunting topics. Virtuous people are depicted full face, evil doers or enemies *en profile*, which at all events makes their pictures more easily understandable by the vulgar than some modern European efforts I have seen since my return. But there does not seem to be any very great demand for artistic works, and I fear that painting as a means of livelihood would be unlikely to yield an enormous income in Abyssinia.

Music is certainly popular; I should describe it as either very ancient or ultra-modern—I am not quite sure which. But it will, I imagine, undoubtedly tend in a modern direction, for while I was there a dramatic society was founded in Adis by the "Young Abyssinians," and presumably they will march—or rather play—with the times.

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(*To be concluded.*)